ALFA ROMEO 1900 C52 “DISCO VOLANTE”

An earthbound race car that could have soared

To the English-speaking ear, it may seem like everything in Italian sounds dramatic, seductive, romantic. “Disco volante” may mean “flying saucer,” but it could be the name of Rome’s hottest answer to Studio 54. The bodywork of the Flying Saucer, built by Carrozzeria Touring, reflects its name. Curvaceous and sultry, pinched wide at the hips, the sheet metal wraps around the wheels with enormous bulges—reminiscent of its slated racing rival, Jaguar’s D-Type.

Both cars were visually weighted by their wheels and tires, but the Disco Volante took it further by enclosing the tops of the wheels underneath bodywork, punctuated by a single strip of chrome. The tail stretched past the rear wheels, tapering into a pair of rounded lights, like a jet’s afterburner trail.

Despite its visual impression, ample space remained for the front wheels to maneuver effectively. Looking at the Disco Volante from the front reveals how the bodywork extends far beyond the skinny tires, terminating at definitive points. This was designed to prevent weathervaning in crosswinds, and Carrozzeria Touring put the Disco Volante through extensive wind tunnel testing to hone that precise lenticular shape. Aided by its curvature, the Disco Volante could nearly reach 140 mph (225 km/h).

Alfa Romeo initially built three Disco Volantes, all convertibles, but later converted one into a coupe. The fixed-roof translation lost nothing in the process: the gracefully tapered, gently sloping roof only served to exaggerate the Disco Volante’s outrageous proportions.

Touring designed the Disco Volante for the 1952 racing season. Though it never raced, it had the credentials: a tubular space frame, enclosing the running gear of the 1900 C Sprint—dual overhead cams, aluminum block, and 156 horsepower—that had competed in the 1952 Mille Miglia, albeit to lackluster results.

Could the Disco Volante, facing the winds on the twisting roads at the foothills of the Alps, have fared better? Alfa Romeo and automotive importer extraordinaire Max Hoffman had high hopes, appealing to American privateers when he launched it at the 1952 New York Auto Show. However, it was not to be: reliability problems forced out any victory lane dreams. What it gave the world, though, was greater than victory: as an aerodynamic testbed, it combined high art with engineering prowess for achieving low drag coefficients. This otherworldly experience provided Alfa Romeo the confidence to outdo themselves one year later, with the B.A.T. 3—a design icon that begat icons.